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AUTHOR Hutchison, Theresa; And Others
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ABSTRACT

College-aged women (N=95) were surveyed to determine the effects of parental divorce on their heterosexual activity and on their attitudes and feelings concerning dating. The 67 participants from divorced families were grouped according to the subject's age when her parents were divorced: 6 years and younger, 7-12 years old, and 13-18 years old. The fourth group consisted of 28 participants from intact families. All participants completed a modified Demographic Survey, a dating attitudes checklist, either the Experience of Divorce Questionnaire or Family Life Questionnaire, depending on their family structure (divorced or intact), and the Heterosexual Activity Questionnaire, which was developed for this study. Analysis of the responses showed that parental divorce had a differential effect on when these women started to date, kiss, engage in sexual petting, and engage in sexual intercourse. The results revealed that, compared to girls from intact families, girls in all divorce groups had their first kiss and started dating at a younger age, and engaged in sexual petting and intercourse more frequently. No significant differences were found between the groups' mean number of dating partners, partners for sexual petting, or partners for sexual intercourse. Implications of the results are discussed, and suggestions for future research are offered. References are included, and results of the study are tabulated. (Author/TE)

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Relationship between family structure and heterosexual activity in college aged women

Theresa Hutchison, Sarah French, Avraham Scherman,
Pamela Walker and Robert Doan

University of Oklahoma

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Abstract

Ninety five college age women were surveyed in order to determine the effects of parental divorce on their heterosexual activity. All participants were instructed to complete a series of questionnaires. On the basis of the responses obtained it appears that parental divorce has a differential effect on when women start to date, kiss, engage in sexual petting and engage in sexual intercourse. Implications of the results as well as suggestions for future research are offered.

Relationship Between Family Structure and Heterosexual Activity in College Aged Women

A number of investigators have identified divorce as a source of major stress upon children and adolescents (Farber, Primavera & Felner, 1983; Hetherington, Cox & Cox ,1979; Kelly and Wallerstein, 1976; Sorosky, 1977; Wallerstein, 1983; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1976, 1980a, 1980b). Several authors have suggested that children of different ages and different developmental stages are differentially affected by divorce in respect both to the severity of their reactions and to the types of behaviors presented (Anthony, 1974; Hetherington, 1972; Kalter, 1977; Rorlich, Ranier, Berg-Cross & Berg-Cross, 1977; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980b; Westman, 1972). However , a summary of the literature by Herzog & Sudia (1973) did not yield consistent evidence of the differential effect of a child's age at divorce. Nevertheless, developmental theory would suggest that parental divorce would affect children at different developmental stages in different ways (Erikson, 1950, 1963; Sorosky, 1977; Westman, 1972).

The purpose of this study is to determine the effects of parental divorce upon the heterosexual activity of college-aged women and upon their attitudes and feelings concerning dating. Possible differential effects of the young woman's age at the time of parental divorce will be examined.

A youngster whose parents obtain a divorce when she is an adolescent might be particularly vulnerable to a premature involvement in sexual activity. Sorosky (1977) suggests that the experience of divorce of

one's parents by an adolescent youngster can intensify sexual conflicts and identify concerns. He theorized that this intensification might either inhibit the expression of sexual conflicts or "stimulate a premature attempt at mastery" (p. 127). Several studies suggest that the latter is the more frequent occurrence among children of divorce. Wallerstein (1983) and Wallerstein & Kelly (1980b) reported that a small group of adolescents girls in their longitudinal study became sexually active at the time of parental separation and were still sexually active at the eighteen-month post-divorce follow-up. A few of these girls began sexual activity soon after they had learned of a parent's extramarital affair. One young girl had a succession of sexual partners during the year after she had learned of her father extramarital sexual activity (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1974). Wallerstein and Kelly (1980b) attributed the onset of or increase in sexual activity among the adolescents, particularly among the girls, to a decrease in parental controls or, in some cases, their absence, the increased visibility of parental sexual behavior and increased anger within the family. The parent's dating or having a partner sleep overnight presented forceful evidence to the adolescent that his or her parent was a sexual being, a fact which youngsters has found easier to ignore in the pre-divorce family (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1974). These factors made the adolescents particularly vulnerable to their own sexuality. Weiss (1979) interviewed twenty adolescents, who reported that they had observed their parent's efforts to establish relationships with the opposite sex. Weiss postulated that these youngsters may have been perceiving the parents as being troubled by some of the same conflicts which they themselves were experiencing and therefore, to view their parents as

unreliable sources of support in their own attempts to resolve the conflicts. In interviews with 150 adolescents from homes where parents had been divorced for twelve to sixteen months, Fry and Trifiletti (1983) found that the youngsters' perception of parental sexual promiscuity was a major source of stress. Farber, Primavera and Felner (1983) also found that parental sexual activity is a source of stress for adolescents. Hepworth, Ryder and Dreyer (1984) found a relationship between parental loss and number of sexual partners of college students. They studied 248 male and female undergraduate students at a large northeastern university. Of these students, 132 were form intact homes, 57 had lost a parent through death and, 61 had lost a parent through divorce. All loss had occurred after the student was 16 years old. Results indicated that students who had lost a parent through death reported few sexual partners, whereas those who had lost a parent through divorce reported the highest number of sexual partners.

Wallerstein and Kelly (1976) suggest that youngsters who experience parental divorce during later latency also are at risk for premature sexual preoccupation and acting out. The risk was greater for the later latency-aged children in their study when the children became aware of parental sexual activity. A significant number of the latency-aged children revealed preoccupation with the sexual activities of their parents (Wallerstein, 1983). Several girls in later latency "were propelled into a precocious adolescence" after becoming aware of parental sexual activity (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980b, p. 106). They expressed an intense desire to grow up quickly and become as sexually active as their parents

as soon as possible. Indeed, some of the girls did begin to reject their peer group in favor of older companions.

The present study postulates that parental divorce will also have delayed effects upon a child, that the stresses which parental divorce places upon a child of any age will make it more difficult for that child to accomplish the developmental tasks which he or she faces at a later age.

Erik Erikson (1950, 1963) theorizes that the first developmental task a child faces is to develop basic trust. According to Erikson, this implies that the child "has learned to rely on the sameness and continuity of outer providers" (1950, 1963, p. 248). Westman (1972) proposes that because parental divorce during infancy causes the mother to be preoccupied and depressed and consequently less available and nurturing to the child, it interferes with the child's development of basic trust. He suggests that this impairment of the capacity to form trusting relationships affects later sexual relationships. One of the assumptions made in our study is that the disruption of basic trust before if is firmly established will interfere with the accomplishment of later tasks described by Erikson with which the person is faced during adolescence and young adulthood, the tasks of identity and intimacy, respectively. Erikson contends that one's identity is defined or established "by projecting one's diffused ego image on another and by seeing it this reflected and clarified" (Erikson, 1950, 1963, p. 262). The assumption of this study is that the experience of the loss of a parent early in life would make the accomplishment of this task more difficult. Either the adolescent would avoid the task altogether by avoiding relationships with the opposite sex, or she would go from relationship to relationship in a

desperate attempt to arrive at her identity. Westman (1972) states that the departure of a young girl's father during the Oedipal period may be experienced by the child as rejection by her first "lover" and will make the later formation of heterosexual relationships an even more difficult and complicated task. A study by Hetherington (1972; 1979) suggests that the loss of a father by a girl of any age does affect her interactions with the opposite sex. Hetherington (1972) found further that early separation (i.e., separation before the age of five) has a grater effect than later separation and that the effects are different with different reasons for the loss. Hetherington studied three groups of firstborn white girls between the ages of 13 and 17 years. Twenty-four of the girls were from intact families; 24 were from male-absent families which had been disrupted by divorce; and 24 were from male-absent families which had been disrupted by the father's death. Significant differences in the behaviors of these three groups of girls were found. Girls from divorced homes engaged in more flirtatious, seductive behaviors with male interviewers; girls who had lost their fathers through death exhibited more shy, withdrawn behavior; while girls from intact families did not exhibit either of these extremes. Observations of the girls at a recreational center revealed that the daughters of divorcees sought more attention from male adults and sought more physical proximity and physical contact from male peers than did girls in either of the other two groups. The daughters of widows, on the other hand, avoided males more than either of the other two groups. The daughters of divorcees reported more heterosexual activity than any other group, whereas the daughters of widows reported less.

There are a number of studies which have examined the relationship between sexual and dating attitudes and behaviors and father loss without examining the effects of the youngster's age when the loss was sustained. Kalter (1977) studied a special population, children who had been referred to outpatient psychiatric evaluation. He reviewed the records of 400 of these children and found that a greater percentage of children from divorced, single-parent families exhibited sexual behavior problems than children from intact families. He also found that when age and sex of the child were controlled, the incidence of sexual behavior was significantly different only for girls aged 12 and older. Girls within this age group had an incidence of sexual behavioral problems two-and -a half times greater than girls from intact families.

Nelson and Vangen (1971) studied the relationship between father absence for any reason and heterosexual behaviors of preadolescent girls in a ghetto environment. They administered a questionnaire which included questions concerning parental relationships, peer relationships, and dating behaviors to 95 black and white eighth-grade girls. They found significant differences between the father-present and father-absent groups in two areas: the frequency of dating and the age at which dating began. Forty-three percent of the girls in each group reported that they had dated. The father-absent group dated significantly more often than the father-present group. Of the girls who were dating 55% of the father-absent group dated once a week or more, compared with 28% of the father-present group. In addition, the father-absent group started dating earlier than the father-present group. Of the girls in the father absent group who had dated, 66% started dating before they were 13 years old. Of the

father-present girls who had dated, only 30% started dating before the age of thirteen.

Booth, Brinkerhoff, and White (1984) studied a sample of college students, 58% of whom were female, and found that a significantly larger number of students whose parents were divorced or permanently separated had engaged in premarital intercourse than students from intact homes.

A study of Eberhart and Schill (1984) suggests that the attitude of black adolescent girls (14-17 years old) of lower socio-economic class from father-absent homes were not more sexually permissive than those from intact homes and that the girls anticipated that their behavior would be consistent with their attitudes. Actual behavior was not assessed in this study.

Developmental theory and the results of experimental investigations which have been reported generate the following hypotheses: 1) that girls who experienced parental divorce during later latency will start dating earlier and will engage in heterosexual activities, such as kissing, sexual petting, and sexual intercourse at an earlier age than girls from intact homes; 2) that girls who experienced parental divorce during adolescence will engage in sexual petting and sexual intercourse at an earlier age than girls from intact homes; 3) that girls who experienced parental divorce during adolescence will engage in sexual activities, such as sexual petting and sexual intercourse, with greater frequency than girls from intact homes; and 4) that girls who experienced parental divorce before the age of six will have a greater number of dating partners and sexual partners than girls from intact homes.

Method

Subjects

Volunteer female subjects between the ages of 18 and 22 years, inclusive, were recruited from classes at a Southern University and through a display in the Student Union, where an investigator was on hand to explain the nature of the study. From a total of 237 subjects, 158 were from intact families and 79 from families who experienced divorce. twelve subjects from divorced homes were excluded for reasons including parental death since the divorce, insufficient demographic information, and the failure to respond to some of the questions on the questionnaires. Subjects from divorced families were placed in one of four groups according to the subject's age when her parents were divorced: 1) Group one - 6 years and younger, 2) Group two - 7 to 12 years old, and 3) Group three - 13 to 18 years old. These age groupings were chosen to correspond with those suggested in the literature (Wallerstein & Kelly,1980b). A total of 67 participants from divorced families were used; 27 from group one, 20 from group two , and 20 from group three. Group four was composed of 28 participants from intact families. These participants were chosen at random from the original 158 to make the groups more nearly even in size. Of the participants from divorced families, 91.4% lived with their mothers immediately after the divorce. This percentage dropped to only 80.3% five years after the divorce, with 6.06% living with their fathers and 13.64% having other living arrangements. Visits with the non-custodial parent were irregular and non-predictable for 49.23% of the participants and were regular and predictable for only 29.23% of the participants.

Instruments

The following questionnaires developed by Fine, Moreland, and Schweble (1982) were modified: Demographic Survey, Experience of Divorce Questionnaire, and Family life Questionnaire. Fine, Moreland Schweble's categories concerning the participant's age at the time of parental divorce were changed to make them consistent with that of Wallerstein and Kelly (1980b). Questions irrelevant to the present study were deleted from the Experience of Divorce Questionnaires, and questions were added concerning issues which the literature indicated are important. Questions were added to the Family life Questionnaire to make it parallel to the modified Experience of Divorce Questionnaire. The Personality and Emotional Self Scale and the Dating and Definite Commitments Scale from the Dating Problems Check List (McHugh, 1979), and the Heterosexual Activity Questionnaire, which we developed for this study, were also used.

Procedures

Testing conditions were kept consistent except for some unavoidable differences in administration. Most of our participants responded to the instruments in groups except ten who responded individually to the instruments. All questionnaire administrators were female. The participants were informed of the sensitive and personal nature of many of the questions and were told that they were free to withdraw from participation at any time. They were informed that the questionnaires would be identifies by number only. All participants were instructed to complete the questionnaires in the following order: Demographic Survey, Dating Attitudes Checklist, Heterosexual Activity

Questionnaire, and either the Experience of Divorce Questionnaire of the Family Life Questionnaire, depending upon family structure.

Results and Discussion

Data obtained on questions using a likert-type format were converted into percentages, and trends were noted. This was done because of the small number of cases per cell and the exploratory nature of the study. There were several trends in the direction hypothesized. Girls who had experienced parental divorce in latency (group Two) tended to start dating at an earlier age than girls from intact families. By the age of 13 years, 21.43% of Group Three (adolescence) had started dating, as compared with 3.57 of the Intact Group. An unexpected trend was found in that the all divorce groups started dating earlier than the subjects from intact families.

There was also a trend for girls who had experienced parental divorce in latency (Group Two) to have their first kiss at a younger age than girls whose parents had remained together. By the age of 13 years , 78.57% of the girls were kissed for the first time, as compared with 42.86% of the Intact Group. An unpredicted trend which appeared is that all the young women who had suffered parental divorce, and not just those who experienced the disruption of their home during later latency or adolescence, had their first kiss at an earlier age than girls whose parents had remained married. By the age of 13 years, 59.26% of the subjects on Group One (preeschool) ,83.34% of the subjects in Group Two (latency) and 65.00% of the subjects in Group Three (adolescence) had been kissed for the first time.

Girls who had experienced parental divorce during adolescence both tended to have sexual intercourse for the first time at an earlier age than girls from intact homes. By the of age of 15 years 28.57% of Group Two (latency) and 20.00% of Group Three (adolescence) had experienced sexual intercourse for the first time, as compared with only 10.71% of the intact group. Furthermore, fewer young women who had experienced parental divorce during later latency or adolescence had never had sexual intercourse than women whose parents had remained married. Only 14.29% of Group Two (latency) and 20.00% of Group Three (adolescence) had never had sexual intercourse. whereas 32.14% of the intact group had never had sexual intercourse.

As hypothesized, there was a trend for young women who had experienced parental divorce during adolescence to engage in sexual petting and also sexual intercourse more frequently than young women whose families had remained intact. From Group Three (adolescence) 20.00% of the participants reported that they engaged in petting more than once a week; only 7.69% if the Intact Group reported the same frequency of sexual petting. Twenty percent of Group Three (adolescence) also reported that they engaged in sexual intercourse more than once a week, as compared with 10.71% of the Intact Group.

Unexpected trends were noted in that all the divorce groups engaged in sexual petting and sexual intercourse more frequently than young women from intact families. Fifty percent of Group Two (latency), and 14.81% of Group one (preschool) engaged in sexual intercourse more than once a week. Thirty -three and a third percent of Group Two (latency) engaged in sexual petting more often than once a week.

Contrary to hypothesis, girls from intact families tended to engage in sexual petting at a younger age than girls who experienced parental divorce during adolescence or later latency. However, girls who experienced parental divorce during early latency or below the age of six tended to engage in sexual petting at an earlier age than from intact families;16.67 % of Group Two (latency) and 14.81% of Group One (preschool had engaged in sexual petting by the age of thirteen, compared with 10.71% of the Intact Group.

Differences between the mean number of dating partners, partners for sexual petting, and partners for sexual intercourse were examined by an analysis of variance. No significant differences were found. However, mean and standard deviations suggest that there is a trend for young

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Insert Table 1 about here

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women of divorce to have a greater number of dating and sexual partners than girls from intact families. Replication of the study with more subjects in each group and more nearly equal groups would be informative.

The hypothesized differential effects of the subject's age at the time of parental divorce was not observed, even in trends. This is contrary to hypotheses derived from a developmental theoretical framework and from empirical studies which were reviewed. This may be due to our inability to control some significant intervening variables. Divorce is not an event; it is a process during and after which many events occur. A number of intervening variables were not controlled, although information about them was obtained. These include the sex of the custodial parent,

the presence of older brothers of a stepfather in the post-divorce home, the relationship with each parent pre- and post-divorce, the frequency of visits from the non-custodial parent, the sex of the custodial parent, and awareness of sexual activities by either or both parents. Control of these variables, though difficult, might produce meaningful results. Control of these variables, though difficult, might produce meaningful data to assist the practicing counselor. Also an investigation of a non-college population might also yield different findings, since the girls most strongly affected might not go to college. This area of investigation is ripe for further study.

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Table 1

Means and standard deviations of dating, petting and sexual intercourse partners.

	Dating partners		Petting partners		Sexual Intercourse	
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
Group One	13.77	13.02	6.92	8.14	4.00	6.79
Group Two	12.27	8.24	5.12	3.56	3.11	3.07
Group Three	14.16	14.74	6.36	6.91	2.80	3.01
Intact	9.63	8.59	3.07	3.74	1.68	2.06